

# COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
March 2, 2006

## TURTLE ISLAND WATERSHED CENTER

File No. 05-110  
Project Manager: Michael Bowen

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$100,000 to Turtle Island Network for the development of an interpretive facility at their headquarters in western Marin County.

**LOCATION:** Sir Francis Drake Boulevard along San Geronimo Creek near Samuel P. Taylor State Park in western Marin County. (Exhibit 1)

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Public Education

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### **EXHIBITS**

- Exhibit 1: Project location and site map
- Exhibit 2: Watershed Center Prospectus
- Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

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### **RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160-31164 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) to Turtle Island Network, for the development of a watershed interpretive center, subject to the condition that the project shall not commence and no funds shall be disbursed for the project until:

1. The Executive Officer has reviewed and approved in writing:
  - a. A project work program, budget, and timeline.
  - b. The names of any contractors Turtle Island Network will retain to carry out all or part of the project.
  - c. A signing plan that acknowledges Conservancy funding.
  - d. Documentation that Turtle Island Network has obtained all permits and approvals required for the project under federal, state and local law.

2. Turtle Island Network has entered into and recorded an agreement pursuant to Public Resources Code Section 31116(c) to protect the public interest in improvements funded under this grant.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and criteria set forth in Chapter 4,5 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31160-31164) regarding the resource goals of the San Francisco Bay area.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. Turtle Island Network is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”

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## **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Turtle Island Network has proposed the development of a watershed interpretive center along San Geronimo Creek within the Lagunitas Creek Watershed in western Marin County. The purpose of the facility will be to educate the public about the links between their own land management practices and protection of the watershed – and ultimately of the coast and ocean. Turtle Island Network (Turtle Island) intends to enhance the site to create a unique, outdoor experiential learning center focused on conservation and restoration.

Turtle Island’s proposed improvements, which will be constructed using solely renewable and sustainable building materials and practices, include the development of an outdoor classroom site to seat up to 40 people in a large redwood grove; a “global garage” that provides sheltered space to enjoy a variety of proposed interpretive displays; wayside panels and kiosks to highlight the presence of the center to passers-by; a short trail network to the streamside; and a public restroom. Turtle Island also proposes to use the inauguration of this new site to launch an environmental intern program in which students can work alongside Turtle Island staff on enhancement projects throughout the watershed.

Turtle Island is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and is well suited to develop and operate an interpretative facility focusing on salmonids within the Lagunitas Creek Watershed. Turtle Island is dedicated to the protection and enhancement of the native anadromous fish of the Lagunitas Watershed, and has undertaken a variety of enhancement and educational measures to achieve their goal of maintaining the current coho salmon runs in the watershed.

### **Site Description**

Lagunitas Creek is the major tributary to Tomales Bay (Exhibit 1). This suburban area, located less than one hour from downtown San Francisco, is semi-rural, zoned residential, and

characterized by a low population density. Much of the surrounding area is protected as open space, and salmon and steelhead are frequently sighted in the streams during the peak spawning periods of November through January.

The suburban setting of Lagunitas Creek belies its importance as a coho salmon-bearing stream. Although California's population of coho has collapsed to as few as 5,000 adults, Lagunitas Creek retains a biologically viable population. This year more than 300 spawning adults have been counted thus far.

Lagunitas Creek is the largest stream system in Marin County. It historically supported a popular salmon and steelhead fishery, but like many coastal streams, those fisheries have been eliminated or drastically reduced due to salmonid population declines. Causes of the declines include water development and land-use activities such as urban development, grazing, and road construction. The resulting increase in sedimentation into the stream channel, coupled with a reduced capacity to flush the sediments from the channel due to water diversion, has caused a significant degradation of aquatic habitat (Smith 1986).

The San Geronimo Creek Watershed has been identified as one of the major contributors of sediment to the Lagunitas Creek system. This relatively unstable watershed has been disturbed mainly by urban development and grazing. San Geronimo Creek contributes approximately 700 tons of sediment per year per square mile to Lagunitas Creek (Esmaili and Associates 1979, as cited in Smith 1986). Located as it is within the upper portion of the San Geronimo watershed, Woodacre Creek is less effected by sedimentation, and therefore of great importance to spawning and rearing salmonids.

The proposed project will play an important role in protecting and enhancing this biologically critical remnant of California's once-great salmon populations.

### **Project History:**

Turtle Island sought Conservancy support for the acquisition of the project site and additional acreage as early as 2003. However, an inability to conclude negotiations with the landowner compelled Turtle Island to hold its application in abeyance until such time as it could move forward with acquisition and development of the watershed center.

Turtle Island notified Conservancy staff in October 2005, that it had acquired the project site with its own resources, and therefore sought Conservancy funds to assist with the development of the interpretive center. This discussion has led to a partnership between Turtle Island, the Coastal Conservancy, and the Marin Community Foundation, which has indicated a willingness to provide Turtle Island with a more favorable loan, a loan that would be conditioned to ensure that the Conservancy's investment in interpretive outreach would either run with the property, or be reimbursable in the unlikely event of default.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy (cash)	\$100,000
Turtle Island Network (cash)	\$200,000
Marin Community Foundation (loan)	\$500,000
<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$800,000</b>

The anticipated source of Conservancy funding is a 2003 appropriation to the Conservancy pursuant to the “Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Act of 2002” (Proposition 50). Section 79571 of the Water Code directs that 10% of Proposition 50 funds allocated to the Conservancy for coastal watershed protection be used “for the acquisition and development of facilities to promote public access to and participation in the conservation of land, water, and wildlife resources.” Subsection (b) identifies eligible projects as “(n)ature centers that are in or adjacent to watersheds and wetlands identified for protection...that provide viewing, outdoor experiences, and conservation education programs to the public and students...(w)ith priority to projects that are operated by or in cooperation with nonprofit organizations and are designed to serve children from urban areas that lack access to natural areas of outdoor programs.” The Turtle Island Network is a nonprofit organization located in a watershed identified as a high priority for protection and which, due to existing goals and objectives, already offers some educational opportunities to the inhabitants of the nearby San Francisco Bay Area.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

Development of the interpretive facility will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31164, pursuant to which the Conservancy may address resource goals in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Under Section 31162, the Conservancy may award grants for projects in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area that help to achieve specified goals. These goals include improving public access to open space areas through the provision of public access facilities (Section 31162(a)), such as the interpretive center proposed by Turtle Island, and promoting and assisting projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for education purposes (Section 31162(c)). The Turtle Island facility will provide educational opportunities to visitors from the greater Bay Area. It is within a short distance from the San Francisco and Oakland metropolitan areas and is along a route that leads to two well-visited recreational sites – Samuel P. Taylor State Park and Point Reyes National Seashore.

The proposed watershed plan is also consistent with the project priorities of the San Francisco Bay Conservancy Program (Section 31163(d)). As discussed below, the watershed plan will serve regional interests and is consistent with the Marin Local Coastal Land Use Plan. The project also includes matching funding and will be implemented in a timely manner.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S  
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective D** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project

will increase coastal recreational opportunities for residents and visitors by the support of a regional environmental education center. The project will result in increased opportunities for environmental education.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

#### **Required Criteria**

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The proposed project is supported by DFG, Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey, Department of Parks and Recreation, County of Marin, and others (Exhibit 3).
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located on Sir Francis Drake Boulevard along San Geronimo Creek near Samuel P. Taylor State Park in western Marin County, within the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area.
5. **Need:** More than one million visitors travel past the proposed project site annually for the purpose of enjoying the natural resources available to the public in western Marin County. Thousands visit Lagunitas Creek during the Fall and Winter months in order to view the spectacle of spawning salmon. Nonetheless, interpretive and educational opportunities are largely missing, and would vastly enhance the experience of visitors to this area. The proposed project would also serve the important role of educating citizens about the need to serve as responsible stewards of natural resources such as the coho salmon. In order to help Turtle Island leverage their acquisition of the project site, Conservancy investment is necessary to convert the site to a true educational and interpretive center.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The biological resources in Lagunitas Creek are of statewide significance. The public trust value of California's salmon and steelhead populations is of great interest to the State of California, and the location of Lagunitas Creek, 27 miles north of San Francisco, provides a rare opportunity to provide interpretation and educational opportunities about a biologically viable population of coho salmon minutes away from a major metropolitan area. The potential educational value of the project is also unusual in that the area provides an opportunity for students of all ages to witness one of nature's great miracles less than an hour's drive from downtown San Francisco.

#### **Additional Criteria**

7. **Urgency:** Coho salmon are currently at six to fifteen percent of their abundance during the 1940s, largely due to inappropriate land use practices of the late twentieth century. Given this decline, and in light of the State's goal of recovering this species to a level of sustained viability, while protecting their genetic integrity, projects that educate the public about our

respective abilities and roles in contributing to the recovery are crucial to the future of our efforts.

8. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
9. **Innovation:** Turtle Island has demonstrated an ability to work with a broad array of partners for the purpose of protecting and enhancing the biological resources of the Lagunitas Creek watershed. The proposed project presents a novel approach to provide public access and to educate visitors and students about widespread watershed protection and enhancement measures.
10. **Readiness:** Turtle Island is fully ready to complete the proposed project.
11. **Realization of Prior Conservancy Goals:** Ecological enhancement of the Lagunitas watershed is a long-established Conservancy goal. More specifically, the Conservancy approved in 1983-1985 a grant of \$150,000 to the Marin Resource Conservation District to conduct a Lagunitas Creek Watershed Restoration Project. This effort focused on reducing erosion sources in key parts of the watershed, including the San Geronimo Valley, a few miles below the project site. Thereafter, through a series of grants, the Conservancy has invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in developing fish passage improvement projects in this watershed. Having acquired two adjacent lots, both suitable for the type of large-home development characterizing much of western Marin in recent years, and having committed to not developing one lot, and utilizing the other as an education center, Turtle Island Network will further enhance the ecological quality of this area by protecting against further development, and by providing a strong conservation message to the community and visitors, thereby amplifying the benefits of the earlier conservation investments.
12. **Cooperation:** The partnership between Turtle Island, its private funders, the Marin Community Foundation, and the Coastal Conservancy will ensure the success of this educational and interpretive undertaking, thereby contributing to the protection and enhancement of coastal resources, such as salmon.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

The Marin County Local Coastal Program Unit 2 Land Use Plan identifies Marin’s numerous coastal zone streams and creeks as sensitive habitats for many species of birds and fish. Lagunitas Creek’s runs of coho and steelhead are specifically highlighted (The Marin County Local Coastal Program Unit 2 Land Use Plan, Pg. 65). Freshwater inflows, sedimentation, water pollution, and protection of riparian habitats are identified as the key concerns for protecting the aquatic resources of the Lagunitas Creek watershed, and the Tomales Bay ecosystem into which Lagunitas flows (ibid, pp. 66-67). Although the project area is outside the Coastal Zone, the proposed facilities will be used provide education about these coastal resources that will enhance public awareness and knowledge about the watershed habitats and that will serve to enhance the likelihood of increased conservation efforts in the future. Further, the proposed facility will utilize two existing lots with one existing home site along San Geronimo Creek in a manner that will benefit the salmonid habitat and preclude other, less benign developments at the site. the proposed project is entirely consistent with the Local Coastal Program Policies.

## **COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The proposed project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for the following reasons:

The proposed project qualifies as a Class 4 categorical exemption pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15304 to the extent that it consists of minor alterations in the condition of land and vegetation which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees. Aspects of the project exempt under this section include:

- Outdoor Classroom: Develop a low-impact “Salmon Circle” to serve as an introductory site for programs and volunteer groups. The circle will use alternative materials to provide permanent seating for up to 40 people beneath the site’s redwood trees.
- Native Plant Landscaping: Plants will be chosen for their enrichment of the native environment, wildlife promotion and water conservation value. The choices will be explained on changeable exhibit panels and through public seminars.
- Rain Garden - Water Catchment Systems Demonstration Project: This model project will show residents and business owners how they can capture roof run-off to ease erosion and flooding. The water can be used for gardening while benefiting the creek.

The proposed project also qualifies as a Class 3 categorical exemption pursuant to §15303 to the extent that it consists of construction of limited numbers of new, small structures, specifically: construction of:

- Global Garage: This feature will provide a sheltered space where adults and children can explore exhibits that highlight the watershed’s natural history and conservation, and link them to global issues and environmental efforts related to water and aquatic species. Turtle Island will upgrade the garage structure and create a “tool-box” of hands-on activities inside. Exhibits will be developed to bring to life the story of the salmon, demonstrate the connection between the creek and coastal habitats, and show fish-friendly visitor and resident practices.
- Wayside panels and kiosk: These interpretive features will be available to visitors at any time. Using the site as an introduction to the habitats of the watershed as a whole, a series of interpretive panels and a central kiosk will illuminate key site features including the sustainable systems (described below), redwood grove, old-growth stump and creekside habitat, as well as explaining the natural history of the salmon.
- Accessible trail: Create a wheel-chair accessible trail to the site’s public exhibit spaces and demonstration systems, through the redwood grove and to the creekside habitat
- Public Bathroom kiosk: This amenity will also explain the functioning and care of on-site septic systems. Homes and businesses in this watershed rely on septic systems to process waste. Currently, failing septic systems impact creek water quality and endanger

human health and wildlife. Turtle Island proposes to develop and install a “fish-friendly” septic system that meets the highest environmental standards. The process will be documented, and the system will be interpreted through wayside exhibits and possibly a short documentary.

- Permeable Surfaces Demonstration Project: Run-off from non-permeable surfaces causes erosion, hydrological changes that cause creeks to go dry in summer, and contributes motor oil and other toxins to the creek. Turtle Island will develop driveway and parking areas that model the use of permeable, sustainable surfaces, and will provide information to visitors and residents on how and why to use them in their own homes.
- Green Building: Building renovations will be completed using energy/water efficient appliances, products and technology (on-demand water heater, refrigerator, toilets, showers, windows, insulation, etc.), recycled, salvaged materials and products. If possible, solar panels will be installed. All of these systems will be interpreted through public seminars, informational materials and exhibit panels.

Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon Conservancy approval of this project.